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ABSTRACT

This monograph discusses the role of the press in reporting the nomination of Senator Thomas Eagleton for Vice President of the United States, the revelation of his hospitalization for mental illness six years prior to the nomination, and his eventual resignation as George McGovern's running mate in the 1972 Presidential elections. Four sections of the booklet consist of a discussion of the nomination, a description of the disclosure of Eagleton's history, an examination of the public reaction, and a review of the resignation based on reports and editorials gleaned from the news media. The final section of this document attempts to place the Eagleton affair in perspective, concluding that most elements of the news media acted responsibly during the controversy. (RB)

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DONALD S. KREGER

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Aftermath

"The vilest character attacks . . .
since the days of Joe McCarthy."

SENATOR Thomas F. Eagleton of Missouri sat down with a reporter from *Newsweek* magazine and reflected on the events of the past week. Earlier that month—on July 14, 1972—he had been chosen vice-presidential nominee on the Democratic ticket with Senator George McGovern of South Dakota. Less than two weeks after his nomination, however, Eagleton's candidacy came into jeopardy when he told a news conference that he had been hospitalized three times for nervous exhaustion, and that he had received electroshock treatments on two of these occasions. At that same press conference, Eagleton was quoted as saying: "I think it is a legitimate question the press has to ask me about whether my health is such that I can hold the high office of vice-president of the United States."[1] Three days later, when asked if he thought newspapers had gone overboard with their stories, he had even joked: "No, I think the press is very well balanced mentally."[2]

The press would not drop the issue during the ensuing week, however, and in his *Newsweek* interview Eagleton took a serious and critical view of editorial reaction:

If I have had a particular disappointment, it would be the newspapers, not any one paper, but the newspapers in general. I'm disappointed because several newspapers for which I have the highest regard would leap to conclusions so quickly and would be so relatively unsophisticated about emotional problems. I had thought the average guy might be uptight about mental fatigue, but not the columnists, editors and publishers of great newspapers. . . .

The press throughout my entire career has been fair, very fair to me. I'm not a press baiter and I can't out-Agnew Agnew. But some-

[1] "Demo Ticket: Furor Over Eagleton's Illnesses," *Congressional Quarterly Report*, July 29, 1972, p. 1852.

[2] "Eagleton Says on Coast He Will Remain," New York *Times*, July 29, 1972, p. 10.

times when you write a baseball story, you have to put yourself in the shoes of the pitcher or manager. And maybe when you write a political story like this one, you have to try to put yourself in Tom Eagleton's shoes. . . .

Maybe I was wrong to think the papers would look at it from my point of view. But I didn't think there was going to be this kind of overreaction. However, in fairness, I've got to acknowledge that I was guilty of more wishful thinking than in-depth thinking. . . .[3]

Mrs. Eagleton's impressions were the same as her husband's. In recounting her story, she told how press response to the disclosures had taken both the Eagletons and the McGoverns by surprise: "I could see right then and there that I had underestimated how they were going to accept it. They thought it was big news. . . ."[4] The press people were friendly, she granted, but they wanted to keep discussing the senator's medical history.

After the Eagletons returned from a campaign trip to Hawaii, Mrs. Eagleton recalled how friends visited them early one Sunday morning. "They would quote the New York *Times* and the Washington *Post*, the kind of papers that I thought would be more sophisticated about the whole thing. . . . People everywhere were saying, 'Hang in there. Stay in there.' At the same time, the press was banging away, day after day, with 'You've got to get out. You've got to step down.' I never would have dreamed it."[5]

"No one thought Tom's health would be a major campaign issue," she concluded. "The whole point of the campaign was to make George McGovern President, but . . . the only issue the press seemed interested in was [Senator Eagleton's] health."[6]

Senator McGovern also felt that the Eagleton story had been blown out of all proportion by the press:

> The method I used to pick my Vice-Presidential candidate was exactly the same as the method used by nine out of ten Presidential candidates. It was a secondary issue, handled the only way it could

[3] "Self, It Won't Be Easy," *Newsweek*, August 7, 1972, p. 17.

[4] Barbara Eagleton with Winzola McLendon, "Mrs. Eagleton's Own Story," *Ladies Home Journal*, October, 1972, p. 111.

[5] *Ibid.*

[6] *Ibid.*, p. 153.

have been handled, but suddenly it was blown up to an issue of comparable significance to the war in Vietnam.

The press unanimously agreed that the Eagleton business indicated "McGovern can't make a decision." It's amazing, truly amazing, how quickly they forgot the thousands of decisions I made that enabled me to move from 2 per cent in the polls to winning the nomination. . . .[7]

Keeping his self-control during the week of crisis was made especially difficult, the Senator said, "with all of those reporters around watching every move I made for the slightest sign of something happening."[8] He described the relationship between politician and the press as "an adversary relationship," and concluded that "in the case of Eagleton they won and we lost. That's all."[9]

McGovern reflected on the bitterness his wife felt toward the press after the Eagleton story broke:

Here were all these fellows who had been dinner guests in our home. People she'd always been fond of, who'd always seemed fond of us. And now they were doing this to me. Saying I wasn't qualified, saying I couldn't make decisions. To my wife, this was a personal betrayal.

She'd always been a much more forgiving person than I was. She'd find an excuse for almost everyone, no matter what he'd done. But during that campaign she developed this hatred for the press, because of the way they were misrepresenting me, that became, really, a pathological thing. That's why she had to leave the campaign in October. She just could not bear to step onto that airplane one more time with all those people whom she hated. . . .[10]

Columnist Karl E. Meyer, writing in the *New Statesman*, saw a bias on the part of Eastern newspapers. If Senator Edward M. Kennedy of Massachusetts had agreed to run, Meyer observed, the Democrats would have been congratulated by the same Eastern newspapers that shrank in dismay at Eagleton's revelations. Yet, in a major personal crisis, Eagleton proved more stable

[7] Joe McGinnis, "Second Thoughts of George McGovern," *New York Times Magazine*, May 6, 1973, p. 88.

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 102.

[9] *Ibid.*

[10] *Ibid.*

than Kennedy.[11] Characterizing the anti-Eagleton segment of the press as "ravenous journalists," Meyer was particularly surprised at the "vehemence" of the editorial comment in "the usually reflective" New York *Times* and Washington *Post*, "which found the senator's sins beyond redemption." Meyer also described *Time* magazine's soft-focus cover photograph of Senator Eagleton as looking like "the demented rapist" in Alfred Hitchcock's film, *Frenzy*.[12]

Two Midwestern newspapers, the Chicago *Tribune* and the St. Louis *Post-Dispatch*, commented editorially on the performance of the press during the Eagleton crisis. The *Post-Dispatch* believed that Senator Eagleton had sustained some of the most "vicious (and contemptible)" questioning by a few members of the news media in the experience of its editors. The newspaper commended the senator for standing up to the "vilest character attacks, on the part of some elements of the press and broadcasts on the [National Broadcasting Company] and [Columbia Broadcasting System] television networks since the days of [Senator] Joe McCarthy."[13] The *Tribune* criticized the editorialists "who might [have been] expected to have a modern, enlightened attitude toward mental illness, but instead called on Mr. McGovern to drop Mr. Eagleton in a ruthless display of political pragmatism."[14]

One of the most sustained and detailed criticisms of the press came from *New Republic* columnist Sedulus. His critique, "The Press as Mob," reviewed what he called "the destruction of Tom Eagleton." "It seemed to me," Sedulus wrote, "like a mob scene of out Shakespeare," explaining that Shakespeare didn't like mobs—calling them "rank-scented." The critic noted that Eagleton wanted to talk about things other than his electroshock therapy, but reporters insisted that it was "the *people*" who wanted the senator to discuss his illness. On the contrary, argued Sedulus, it was the journalists themselves who were rank-scented and wanted Eagleton to discuss nothing but his psychiatric history.[15]

[11] Karl E. Meyer, "The Eagleton Affair," *New Statesman*, August 4, 1972, p. 147.

[12] *Ibid.*, p. 148.

[13] Editorial, August 1, 1972, p. 2-B.

[14] *Editorials on File*, July 16-31, 1972, p. 920.

[15] "Sedulus on TV," August 19, 1972, p. 19.

Sedulus recalled that an interviewer in San Francisco had asked Eagleton if he minded "the *hysteria* of the press." "Only by calling it hysteria," the critic agreed, "[could] we escape calling it worse. . . . Yes, hysteria [was] the word rather than villainy."[16] The results were the same, he said, whether evil or hysteria ran the show: just to have the questions there was enough to kill off Eagleton. Sedulus accused the Washington *Star-News* of having the knife out for Senator Eagleton with loaded page-one banner headlines for a whole week ("McGovern Ponders," "McGovern shifting on Eagleton," "Eagleton Gets the Word Tonight"). NBC commentator John Chancellor, he said, was objective and spoke without malice. The other networks, however—especially CBS—were consistently more aggressive, and prone to an inquisitorial mode of questioning. Sedulus commented that moderator George Herman, on the CBS program, *Face the Nation*, "managed to dig in like a Jewish mother who suspects her son of lying."[17]

"What impressed me throughout the proceedings," the *New Republic* critic concluded, "was the dazzling insensitivity of the press to its power role." He recalled columnist Mary McGrory of the Washington *Star-News* writing that an execution had taken place and that McGovern was the executioner. "She didn't mention the press," Sedulus added. In the Eagleton case the people saw "a stunning contemptuous instance of how the press [had] come inadvertently to display all the tyranical powers that our country [had] traditionally feared to be vested in the hands of the government." It was the journalists who had "set *themselves* up as the appropriate makers and unmakers of a presidential candidate. . . ."[18]

To discover how people felt about press handling of the Eagleton story, students of the School of Journalism at Kent State University conducted a telephone survey of sixty-five persons chosen at random in the Akron, Ohio, area. Thirty-five respondents identified themselves as Democrats, fourteen as Republicans, and fifteen as independents. (One person refused to label his political affiliation.) Of those questioned, 48 per cent said they

[16] *Ibid.*, p. 20.
[17] *Ibid.*, p. 19.
[18] *Ibid.*, p. 20.

believed that newspapers should not have published stories concerning Senator Eagleton's record of mental illness; 38 per cent said that newspapers should have published the stories; and 14 per cent were undecided. Not unexpectedly, the Democrats were 62 to 32 per cent against publishing, and the Republicans 36 to 26 per cent in favor of publishing the information. A large number of Republicans (38 per cent) were undecided.[19]

Two observers suggested that the Eagleton story happened to come along at a convenient time for the news media. "In the summer dog days," wrote Karl E. Meyer in the *New Statesman*, "Eagleton's misfortunes filled the page one vacuum,"[20] and a New York *Times* reporter, Steven V. Roberts, noted that "most newsmen, particularly those of the electronic media, are under rather substantial home office pressures to produce dramatic copy. When news is slow, they grab for what is available."[21] Roberts described the scene at McGovern's retreat in South Dakota, with hundreds of journalists encamped there, feverishly seeking fresh copy. They had learned little that was more exciting than the name of Senator McGovern's horse. Then, in the middle of a sweltering mid-summer week, all the energies of the media, which had been idling in the summer news slump, suddenly revved up when Eagleton made his disclosures.[22]

Were the "columnists, editors and publishers of great newspapers"—to use Senator Eagleton's phrase—really as "unsophisticated," "uptight about mental fatigue" and guilty of "overreaction" as he seemed to think? How justified were those critics who condemned elements of the press as "vicious," "ravenous," "ruthless" and "rank-scented?"

To obtain an objective picture of how the press reacted editorially to the Eagleton affair, a study of 66 periodicals—14 magazines and 52 daily newspapers—was undertaken. The purpose was not to quantify how many publications took certain positions, or how many were for or against Eagleton or McGovern. It was instead to organize the volume of press commentary during those trau-

[19] "Many in Survey Rap Papers for Eagleton Story," *Editor & Publisher*, September 9, 1972, p. 50.

[20] Meyer, *op. cit.*, "Eagleton Affair," p. 147.

[21] "The Media," New York *Times*, July 30, 1972, p. 1, sec. 4.

[22] *Ibid.*

matic days, and thereby learn which major issues were discussed by the press at various stages of the week-long crisis and to examine the range of response to those issues. Finally, the author wanted to arrive at his own judgment as to whether the press had acted fairly and responsibly in covering the story.

The 52 newspapers consulted yielded a total of 84 editorials. Sixteen of these ran immediately after the Eagleton nomination; 38 following his medical disclosures and 30 after his resignation from the Democratic ticket. A number of magazine and newspaper columnists were also part of the inquiry, among them James Reston of the New York *Times*, Mary McGrory of the Washington *Star-News* and Shana Alexander of *Newsweek* magazine. The papers included in the study were chosen on an availability basis rather than by any scientific selection process. The purpose was to obtain wide variation in city size and circulation, geographic location, ownership[23] and the like. The distributions are given in Table 1.

TABLE 1

Characteristics of the 52 Newspapers Consulted

Circulation		*Group Ownership*	
500,000 and over	9	Newhouse	5
300,000-499,000	10	Knight	3
100,000-299,999	22	Hearst	3
Under 100,000	11	Cowles	2
	52	Not group owned, other	36
			52

Region	
National distribution	2
New England	5
Middle Atlantic	4
Border and South	15
Midwest	17
Mountain and Pacific	8
Caribbean	1
	52

[23] *1972 Editor & Publisher International Yearbook.*

The geographical distribution covers every section of the country: 42 cities—in 27 states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico—ranging in size from New York, Chicago and Los Angeles to Biloxi, Mississippi, and Burlington, Vermont. Newspapers and magazines consulted are listed in the appendix.

Thirty-six of the papers identified themselves as independent; nine as independent-Democratic; and five as independent-Republican. In actual preference, however, 24 papers supported Richard Nixon in 1968; 13 declared for Hubert Humphrey and three remained undeclared.[24]

As might be expected, the heaviest volume of editorial comment in the study came from the largest papers and from those papers with the greatest degree of involvement in the story. The St. Louis *Post-Dispatch* ran the most editorials—six, followed by the New York *Times* and the Washington *Post* with four editorials each. Seven other papers each published three editorials.

The study begins with the nomination of Senator Eagleton, reviews how the week of crisis was covered in the press, synthesizes editorial reaction to the senator's medical disclosures and subsequent resignation and closes with a critique of press performance.

[24] "624 for Nixon—146 for Humphrey," *Editor & Publisher*, November 2, 1968, pp. 9-12.

Nomination

"He . . . clearly is a man in whom the South Dakotan has confidence."

At 9 A.M. on July 13, 1972, a few hours after he became the Democratic presidential nominee, Senator George McGovern and his top advisers turned their attention to the selection of a running mate. The senator's first choice had been widely reported to be Senator Edward M. Kennedy, but whether McGovern really believed Kennedy would accept is a matter of dispute. *U.S. News & World Report* wrote that Senator McGovern never really had any hopes that Kennedy would join the ticket.[1] but *Time* magazine reported that McGovern's refusal to believe Kennedy would not run left little time for another selection after the presidential nomination had finally been won.[2] In any case, Kennedy would not accept, and a group of 21 McGovern aides and advisers began to sort out the remaining possibilities. There were 55 names on the list to begin with, but this was quickly trimmed to 24, then to nine. Two more names were eliminated, and the final seven were taken to Senator McGovern.[3]

At midday McGovern summoned representatives of the black, Chicano and women's caucuses to solicit their views, and by one o'clock there were three finalists: Senator Walter Mondale of Minnesota, Senator Abraham Ribicoff of Connecticut, and Mayor Kevin White of Boston. Mondale and Ribicoff eliminated themselves, and there were strong objections to White because of his earlier support of Senator Edmund Muskie of Maine. Shortly after 3:30 that afternoon—as the deadline approached for filing candidates with the Democratic National Committee—McGovern placed a call to Senator Thomas F. Eagleton of Missouri. The two senators were acquainted, but not much more than that. "The

1 "Why Eagleton Was Picked," July 24, 1972, p. 25.
2 "McGovern's First Crisis," August 7, 1972, p. 2.
3 "Is It an Era—Or only an Hour?" *Newsweek*, July 24, 1972, p. 27.

longest conversation I had with Senator McGovern," Eagleton admitted, "was one hour in the Senate steam bath in early 1969."[4]

There was little doubt that Eagleton would accept the vice-presidential nomination if offered. *Time* magazine reported that he had "stayed up half the previous night sipping gins and tonic and wisecracking with aides to ease the tension." The next morning, the day after McGovern's nomination, "Eagleton paced his hotel room like a caged cat, twitching each time the phone rang."[5]

The man McGovern picked as his running mate was a 42-year-old lawyer from St. Louis who had had a meteoric political career. He had been elected St. Louis circuit attorney at the age of 26, attorney general of Missouri at 31, lieutenant-governor at 35—the youngest man elected to each of these offices in Missouri history. Eagleton had defeated former Senator Edward V. Long in the 1968 Democratic senatorial primary and had gone on to win in the general election against Republican Congressman Thomas Curtis by a margain of 37,000 votes, while Hubert Humphrey was losing the state to Richard Nixon by 22,000 votes.[6]

Since arriving in the capital, Eagleton had built a liberal record. He favored cutting military spending, election reform, moderation in race relations, and was strongly opposed to the war in Vietnam. His particular area of expertise was urban affairs, and he advocated massive spending to rescue the cities. His committee assignments included labor, public works, aging and the chairmanship of the District of Columbia committee. Eagleton's father had been a prominent St. Louis attorney, long active in Republican politics. The elder Eagleton, in fact, had run for mayor of St. Louis and lost by a small margin. Described as a kind of Midwestern Joe Kennedy, Eagleton had imbued his son with a deep interest in politics and a fierce drive for achievement. "It was constantly drilled in us to be interested in current events," the senator recalled.[7]

At the age of 10, Tom had accompanied his father to the 1940

[4] "Eagleton: McGovern's Man from Missouri," *Time*, July 24, 1972, p. 21.
[5] *Ibid.*
[6] "Senator Eagleton's Background," *Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report*, July 15, 1972, p. 1716.
[7] "Tom Who? The Man Named Eagleton," *Newsweek*, July 24, 1972, p. 28.

Republican convention in Philadelphia (he was for Wilkie). In high school, he was provided with two tutors: one to broaden his knowledge of national and international affairs, and the other to teach him public speaking.[8]

As an undergraduate at Amherst College, Eagleton had been a campus politician. As a student at Harvard Law School he was reputed to have read five newspapers daily. He went to college in the summer because "Dad thought it asinine for a mind to lie fallow for four months."[9] An acquaintance put it another way: "He was always being pushed by his father. This may have contributed to his difficulties."[10] Eagleton himself says simply that he always wanted to be a politician, even as a boy. "I never wanted to be a policeman or a cowboy, like other kids," he recalled.[11]

Press reaction to the Eagleton nomination was centered in two main areas: political and personal. His most frequently mentioned political assets were his compatibility with McGovern on major issues, his urban orientation, his ties to labor, his cordial relations with the black community, his relative youth and his political experience and liberalism. "He is something of a McGovern soul mate," said the Kansas City *Times*, "and clearly is a man in whom the South Dakotan has confidence."[12] A McGovern adviser, Stewart Udall, confirmed that the decision was made to go "not for balance but to double up on strength."[13]

Eagleton's good relationship with organized labor was seen both as an opportunity to gain financial support and to help unify the splintered Democratic party—to bring some of the "wandering elements" back into the fold. The *Wall Street Journal* reported that the senator had a rating of 20 "rights" and only three "wrongs" on the liberal scorecard issued by COPE, the AFL-CIO's political arm. The three "wrongs" were his opposition to the Lockheed Aircraft loan and to the supersonic transport, and his vote for confirmation of William H. Renquist to the United

[8] "Eagleton: McGovern's Man," p. 21.
[9] "A Question—and a Wrong Answer," *Life*, August 4, 1972, p. 31.
[10] "McGovern's First Crisis," p. 12.
[11] "Why Eableton was Picked," p. 25.
[12] *Editorials on File*, July 1-15, 1972, p. 864.
[13] "Tom Who?" p. 28.

States Supreme Court.[14] Eagleton's first assignment, said *U.S. News & World Report*, would be to make himself better known to the nation. Then, he would try to gain the backing of union leaders and other party old-timers who had left the convention with bruised feelings.[15]

The St. Louis *Post-Dispatch* pointed out that Eagleton could be a bridge "between the old and new politics," since he spoke the language of crusty professionals and was also endowed with the progressive ideas of the newcomer.[16] The New York *Times* observed that Eagleton was a party regular, well regarded by the conservative Missouri organization, making him a reassuring figure to other party regulars.[17]

Although Eagleton's Catholicism was included in most lists of his political assets, the Kansas City *Times* doubted that this would sway many voters,[18] and on the question of ticket-balancing, the *Wall Street Journal* noted that the senator's pure strain of urban liberalism would be more palatable to the South by virtue of his border state origins.[19]

Negative reaction to the nomination was scattered and restrained. The Chicago *Tribune* believed that Eagleton would not add much to his running mate's chances. McGovern, reasoned the *Tribune*, might have placated the South by the choice of a Southerner (such as Governor Reuben Askew of Florida), mollified labor by choosing one of its own (UAW chief Leonard Woodcock) or pleased both the South and Wall Street by selecting Representative Wilbur Mills of Arkansas. "It [seemed] that Mr. Eagleton's only real advantage," concluded the *Tribune*, "[was] that he [did] not offend, and inoffensiveness [was] not a quality to stir up campaign fervor. Mr. Eagleton [was] no Teddy Kennedy."[20]

There was some grumbling about Eagleton's relative inexpe-

[14] Arlen J. Large, "McGovern, in Picking Eagleton as No. 2 Man Picks 'Perfect Nobody,'" July 14, 1972, p. 23.

[15] "The McGovern Strategy Against Nixon," July 31, 1972, p. 22.

[16] Editorial, July 14, 1972, p. 2-B.

[17] Editorial, July 14, 1972, p. 30.

[18] *Editorials on File*, July 1-15, 1972, p. 864.

[19] Large, "Perfect Nobody," p. 1.

[20] *Editorials on File*, July 1-15, 1972, p. 867.

rience (only four years in the Senate), and the two-peas-in-a-pod redundancy of the ticket. The Salt Lake City *Deseret News* wondered editorially about McGovern's wisdom in selecting such an obscure figure, since the South Dakotan himself was still largely unknown. The paper admitted, however, that Americans need not remain long in the dark about the record and qualifications of a public figure with a national platform in this day of rapid communications.[21] In what was perhaps the most inadvertently prophetic statement of all, the Atlanta *Constitution* predicted that "[We would] all know a lot more about him . . . in the weeks and months to come."[22]

There was general agreement by the press concerning Senator Eagleton's personality and style. He was described as an "articulate speaker," a "strong, energetic campaigner," a "zestful partisan" and a "skilled performer." The *Wall Street Journal*, while assessing Eagleton's manner as "often tense and high strung on public occasions," nevertheless reminded readers that the senator had been picked by his Democratic colleagues as a sort of political anchor man for a panel of Congressional leaders responding to President Nixon's State of the Union address.[23] The New York *Times* called Eagleton "an intelligent, conscientious and compassionate legislator"[24] and the Los Angeles *Times* said he had a record in both Missouri and the senate for "diligence, ambition and decency."[25] Eagleton's frankness in detailing the reasons he was selected by McGovern struck the New York *Times* as "refreshingly candid,"[26] and the Roanoke (Virginia) *Times* also commented on the senator's "appearance of candor and sincerity."[27]

Newsweek magazine was particularly generous in its assessment of the Missourian, calling him "one of the acknowledged stars among first term senators." The magazine described the Eagleton mix as consisting of "intense social consciousness, revved-up

[21] *Ibid.*, p. 865.
[22] Editorial, July 15, 1972, p. 4-A.
[23] "Perfect Nobody," p. 23.
[24] Editorial, July 14, 1972, p. 30.
[25] Editorial, July 14, 1972, p. 6, Pt. 11.
[26] Editorial, July 14, 1972, p. 30.
[27] *Editorials on File*, July 1-15, 1972, p. 866.

personal drive, and a first-rate extraverted wit." The senator, predicted *Newsweek*, could prove to be "the most engaging politician west of Ted Kennedy," and made note of the "picture-book" Eagleton family.[28]

It did not escape some political observers that Eagleton would present a keen contrast to the "hyperbolic hysteria"[29] and "abrasive belligerence"[30] of Vice-President Spiro T. Agnew. The failure of McGovern to convince Kennedy to run was looked upon as a blessing in disguise by the Roanoke *Times*. Kennedy, still haunted by the Chappaquidick affair, could "mock the tone of moral crusade set by Senator McGovern" if he were on the ticket. Furthermore, the newspaper added, McGovern might have been overshadowed by Kennedy. The Democratic nominee would be much more comfortable with Eagleton.[31]

[28] "Tom Who?" p. 28-9.
[29] Editorial, Detroit *Free Press*, July 15, 1972, p. 6-A.
[30] Editorial, reprinted in *Editorials on File*, July 1-15, 1972, p. 866.
[31] *Ibid.*

Disclosure

"This word 'shock.' Boy, that's a tough word for the public."

On Tuesday, July 25, eleven days after his nomination for vice-president, Senator Thomas F. Eagleton faced a hastily-called press conference in Custer, South Dakota. He informed reporters that he had been voluntarily hospitalized three times between 1960 and 1966 for "nervous exhaustion and fatigue," and that he had been given electroshock treatments twice to combat depression. The first hospitalization, Eagleton said, had taken place at Barnes Hospital in St. Louis from approximately December 1, 1960, to January 1, 1961. The second was for four days at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, between Christmas, 1964, and New Year's Day, 1965, occurring six weeks after Eagleton's winning campaign for lieutenant-governor of Missouri. The third hospitalization was in middle or late September of 1966—again at the Mayo Clinic—for a period of three weeks. For the past six years, the senator said, his health had been good.

With his running mate standing beside him, Eagleton then answered questions put by reporters: Did he find during periods of exhaustion that it affected his ability to make rational judgments? Was alcohol involved in any way? Had he received psychiatric help? What kind? Any drugs? Did he intend to make documentation of his medical history public? What physicians had he seen? Why did he decide to discuss the subject then when he had not previously?[1] The senator answered all questions, but he declined to make his medical records public, pointing out that they were in technical language that laymen wouldn't understand.

Senator McGovern declared his staunch support of Eagleton. "I wouldn't have hesitated one moment had I known everything

[1] "Excerpts from Eagleton News Parley," New York *Times*, July 26, 1972, p. 20.

Senator Eagleton said here today," he stated.[2] "When I talked to Senator Eagleton about my decision to ask him to go as my running mate," McGovern continued, "I asked if he had any problems in the past that were significant or worth discussing with me. He said no, and I agree with that." What it manifested on Eagleton's part, McGovern concluded, was "the good judgment to seek out medical care when he was exhausted."[3] Senator Eagleton, for his part, discounted any surprise on the side of the McGovern team. "Senator McGovern's staff was aware, I believe, the night before my name was put into nomination . . . of the rumors . . . and they were satisfied as to my health."[4] Later, Eagleton would give McGovern's reaction to the news: "George indicated that he felt the story wasn't a real big deal."[5]

The sudden press conference in Custer was not a decision generated solely by McGovern and Eagleton. Rather, it was the product of a series of events that started as far back as the Democratic convention in Miami Beach. There had been rumors concerning Senator Eagleton at the convention, and these rumors had come to the attention of the McGovern staff. What is not entirely clear, however, is whether these rumors were about the senator's past medical difficulties, his alleged drinking or both. In any case, a McGovern aide, Gordon Weil, made a few perfunctory phone calls and found nothing to substantiate the talk.[6] *Newsweek* reported that an hour after the decision had been made to put Eagleton on the ticket, McGovern staffers called Kansas City newspapermen to ask what hospital Senator Eagleton had been in. The McGovern aides were also reported to have called Senator Eagleton's administrative assistant for information.[7]

The second circumstance involved the actions of Senator Eagleton and his staff. *Time* reported that Eagleton aides

[2] "Demo Ticket: Furor Over Eagleton Illnesses," *Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report*, July 29, 1972, p. 1851.

[3] "Eagleton's Own Story of His Health Problems," *U.S. News & World Report*, August 7, 1972, p. 16.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 19.

[5] "A Crisis Named Eagleton," *Newsweek*, August 7, 1972, p. 15.

[6] "Demo Ticket," *op. cit.*, p. 1851.

[7] "A Crisis," *op. cit.*, p. 13.

briefed the McGovernites, including key McGovern adviser Frank Mankiewicz, on Friday, July 14, immediately after the Eagleton nomination. The briefing covered the hospitalizations and the electroshock treatments but did not mention specific dates. Mankiewicz then went off for a short rest to the Virgin Islands. When he returned to Washington, he had breakfast with Senator Eagleton and heard the full story. "This word 'shock,'" he said. "Boy, that's a tough word for the public."[8]

Eagleton had planned to sit down with McGovern himself and tell him the same story, but McGovern had scheduling conflicts and put him off.[9] Mrs. Eagleton confirmed this in her account of the Eagleton affair. "Tom planned to discuss his health background with Senator McGovern but they had difficulty in getting together; they were going in different directions."[10] Also during this period, Eagleton had two medical checkups—one by the senate medical staff and the other at Bethesda Hospital. The examinations, however, did not include a psychiatric test.[11]

What eventually forced the issue was the persistent digging into the story by a pair of newsmen from the Washington bureau of the Knight newspapers. It began when reporter Clark Hoyt went to St. Louis to check out rumors of an Eagleton drinking problem. While Hoyt was en route to Missouri, John Knight III, grandson of the editorial chairman of the newspaper group, received an anonymous phone call at his office at the Detroit *Free Press*. The caller identified himself as a Democrat who wanted to protect Senator McGovern, and gave Knight a somewhat inaccurate record of the Eagleton hospitalizations. The informant also made telephone calls to Frank Mankiewicz and McGovern's campaign manager, Gary Hart, but the calls were considered those of a crank. Knight received two additional calls from the informant with further information and he passed along what he had learned to Clark Hoyt in St. Louis.[12]

Hoyt assembled the story all week through newspaper clippings

8 "Eagleton's Own Odyssey," *Time*, August 7, 1972, p. 14.

9 "A Crisis," p. 13.

10 Barbara Eagleton with Winzola McLendon, "Mrs. Eagleton's Own Story," *Ladies Home Journal*, October, 1972, p. 156.

11 "A Crisis," p. 13.

12 "The Best and the Most," *Newsweek*, August 7, 1972, p. 58.

and interviews with key sources. Then he and Knight's Washington bureau chief, Bob Boyd, went to Mankiewicz on July 23 and gave him a two-page memorandum of their findings. They told Mankiewicz they wanted to run the story after seeing the medical records, talking with the physicians and interviewing Eagleton himself. The two newsmen were promised an interview with Eagleton on July 25 and were led to believe that there would be no press conference until the story broke. Eagleton, meanwhile, had flown to South Dakota to have a face-to-face meeting with McGovern. He offered to withdraw from the ticket, but McGovern declined and the decision was made to hold a news conference immediately to put an end to the matter. Mankiewicz then informed Boyd and Hoyt—as well as the other reporters in Custer—that a press conference would take place in 20 minutes.[13] The Knight reporters, in the words of *Time* magazine, were "done out of a scoop while performing in the best traditions of responsible journalism."[14]

As a kind of consolation prize, Hoyt and Boyd were given an interview with Eagleton, who informed them that the timing of the news conference was "because of you guys."[15] The senator, however, denied suggestions that he would not have disclosed his medical history if the Knight newsmen had not discovered it. "I had made up my mind," he said, "that I was going to disclose it in this campaign in any event."[16]

On Wednesday, July 26, the morning after the news conference at Custer, the Eagleton revelations made front-page news around the country ("Eagleton Tells of Shock Therapy on Two Occasions," "Treated 3 Times by Psychiatrists, Eagleton Reveals," "Eagleton Discloses Health Problems"). The stories told of the senator's treatment for nervous exhaustion during the previous twelve years, including counseling, medication to induce sleep and electroshock therapy. They quoted Eagleton's description of himself in his press conference statement as "a rather intense, hard-driving man" who for the past six years had enjoyed—in

[13] *Ibid.*

[14] "Knight vs. Eagleton," August 7, 1972, p. 32.

[15] *Ibid.*

[16] "Excerpts," *op. cit.*, p. 20.

Eagleton's own words—"good, sound, solid health."[17] The *Wall Street Journal* reported that "Senator McGovern told [the American Broadcasting Company] that his decision that Eagleton should stay on the ticket [was] 'absolutely' irrevocable."[18]

Pro- and anti-Eagleton sentiment quickly began to coalesce. Some Democratic party and labor leaders feared that the disclosures would hurt fund-raising efforts and called for Eagleton to quit. There was concern that if Eagleton remained on the ticket, it would mute the assault on Agnew, muffle Eagleton's natural ebullience and cause him to become self-conscious. It could also alienate working class and Catholic voters.[19] Senators of both parties issued statements attesting to Eagleton's competence and capacity for high office,[20] and President Nixon was reported to have given orders to his staff and campaigners not to discuss the issue.[21] Irving H. Chase, president of the National Association for Mental Health, urged the public not to permit Senator Eagleton's past medical history to affect attitudes about his competency,[22] while at the same time, some newspapers were already calling for the candidate's resignation. Senator Eagleton himself, meanwhile, had flown to Los Angeles, where he held another news conference. Again he declined to release his medical records.

The following day, Thursday, July 27, newspaper headlines reflected Senator McGovern's support of his running mate ("Eagleton Stays—McGovern," "McGovern Backs Eagleton Despite Demands for Ouster"). Senator McGovern was quoted as voicing "1,000 per cent" backing of Eagleton and said he hadn't any intention of dropping him from the ticket.[23] McGovern also said he wouldn't be "stampeded" by critical telegrams into re-

[17] "Excerpts from the Eagleton News Parley," New York *Times*, July 26, 1972, p. 20.

[18] "What's News," *Wall Street Journal*, July 26, 1972, p. 1.

[19] "A Crisis," p. 13.

[20] "A Question—and a Wrong Answer," *Life*, August 4, 1972, p. 28-A.

[21] *Ibid.*

[22] "The Eagleton Affair: Stigma of Mental Disorder," *Science News*, August 5, 1972, p. 81.

[23] "What's News," *Wall Street Journal*, July 27, 1972, p. 1.

moving Eagleton.[24] Eagleton, meanwhile, indicated he would withdraw if it appeared that his revelations would hurt McGovern's chances, and conceded he had erred in not disclosing his medical history sooner. He had had a hectic time on the day of his selection, he explained, and would have told McGovern about it sooner if he had had time to think.[25] That same day, columnist Jack Anderson charged that Eagleton had been arrested between six and eleven times for drunken and reckless driving. Eagleton was in Hawaii at the time to make a speech, and the morning papers of July 28 carried his denial of the accusations ("Eagleton Says Allegations of Drunken Driving Are a Lie"). Stories filed the same day also reported McGovern's insistence that he would not tamper with the ticket, and quoted Eagleton's determination to remain a candidate.

On the afternoon of July 28, at Senator McGovern's South Dakota retreat, the presidential nominee began what *Time* called "an elaborate media intrigue, apparently designed to transmit a message to Eagleton that it was time to fold his tent." McGovern spoke first to reporter Jules Witcover of the Los Angeles *Times*, indicating that he had decided that Eagleton should go, that he felt Eagleton would come to the same conclusion and that even if Eagleton would not quit of his own volition, he, McGovern, would probably scuttle him.[26]

At dinner that evening, McGovern table-hopped among reporters in the dining room. The gist of his message was that perhaps Eagleton should withdraw after all, but that the final decision was up to Eagleton himself. The senator's reasons for this apparent change were threefold: 1) the fact that psychiatrists had told him a relapse was possible, 2) the possible impact on the election, where even a shift of 1 per cent could be decisive and 3) the damage done to the Democrats' credibility by Eagleton's lack of candor.[27]

Witcover's story appeared the next morning in the Los Angeles *Times* ("McGovern Wants Eagleton off the Ticket"). Other

[24] *Ibid.*
[25] *Ibid.*
[26] "A Crisis," p. 16.
[27] *Ibid.*

newspapers played the same story with varying degrees of finality ("McGovern Is Less Firm on Eagleton," "McGovern Restudies Decision on Eagleton," "McGovern Reported Ready to Let Eagleton Quit," "Up to Eagleton: McGovern," "McGovern Opens Door for Eagleton to Resign"). Washington *Star-News* columnist Mary McGrory wrote that "the thought of a fragile campaign being fought out on the question of 'those little blue pills' and electric shock treatments [drained] the blood from McGovern faces."[28]

By Sunday, July 30, events were moving rapidly toward a resolution. Newspaper headlines reflected Eagleton's resolve to stand fast ("Eagleton Won't Quit, Says He Is a 'Plus' "), as well as his confidence in McGovern's backing ("Eagleton Says McGovern Remains Firm in Support"). The clamor for the senator's resignation continued ("Delegations in 3 States Say Eagleton Should Quit"), but no final decision would be made until the running mates conferred on Monday ("Meeting to Decide Eagleton's Future"). Eagleton was scheduled to appear that Sunday afternoon on CBS's "Face the Nation," while Democratic National Chairwoman Jean Westwood and Vice-Chairman Basil Peterson were to be interviewed on NBC's "Meet the Press." McGovern, meanwhile, had spoken to Eagleton by telephone to arrange their meeting in Washington for the next day. He told Eagleton that he was under intense pressure to drop him but insisted that he was with his running mate all the way until they had had a chance to talk.

The two lead stories in morning newspapers of July 31 were Eagleton's last-ditch efforts to remain a candidate ("Eagleton Hints He'll Fight to Stay on Ticket") and the simultaneous call for his withdrawal by Democratic leaders Westwood and Peterson ("Party Chiefs Urge Eagleton to Resign"). Chairwoman Westwood had said that "it would be a noble thing" for the vice-presidential nominee to step aside. For his own part, Eagleton reiterated his intention to remain, and said he wouldn't automatically quit even if McGovern asked him to: "I'd have to weigh it."[29] The two candidates were to meet that evening to

[28] "Eagleton Must Go; Muskie Eyed," Boston *Globe*, July 27, 1972, p. 6.
[29] "What's News," *Wall Street Journal*, July 31, 1972, p. 1.

reassess the situation. On CBS's "Face the Nation" the previous day, columnist Jack Anderson had apologized to Eagleton for publishing unsubstantiated charges of drunken driving. Anderson declined to retract the charges, however, until he had checked out the documentation.

Earlier in the week, both *Time* and *Newsweek* had commissioned polls to gauge reaction to the Eagleton disclosures. The *Time* survey included interviews with 1,015 eligible voters and showed a slight shift to Nixon by McGovern supporters and by those who had hitherto considered themselves neutral.[30] The *Newsweek* poll was a telephone survey of 513 people, and indicated that 17 per cent of the Democrats and 33 per cent of the independents felt less friendly to the ticket than they had previously.[31] McGovern could not have found the two polls comforting, since he had already said that "if we took a poll and 99 per cent of the people thought [Eagleton] should stay on the ticket, that other 1 per cent could still be crucial."[32]

Newspapers published Tuesday morning reported the outcome of the Monday night McGovern-Eagleton meeting ("Eagleton Quits at Request of McGovern: Says He Does Not Want to 'Divide' Party," "Eagleton Quitting Reluctantly," "Eagleton Out, McGovern Blames Health Debate"). The news stories carried McGovern's statement that "the public controversy over Eagleton's health [continued] to divert attention from the great national issues that [needed] to be discussed," and quoted Eagleton's willingness to subordinate his personal feelings "to the necessity to unify the Democratic party and elect George McGovern president of the United States." His conscience was clear, he declared, and his spirits were high.[33]

During the furor over his medical disclosures, Eagleton had been steadfast in defending his actions. In 1966, the year of his third hospitalization, his staff had reported that he was at the Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore for treatment of a "gastric

[30] "McGovern's First Crisis: The Eagleton Affair," *Time*, August 7, 1972, p. 12.

[31] "A Crisis," p. 13.

[32] "McGovern's First Crisis," p. 12.

[33] "Withdrawal: Nominee for Vice President," *Vital Speeches of the Day*, August 15, 1972, p. 643.

disturbance," when, in fact, he was at the Mayo Clinic in Minnesota being treated for nervous exhaustion. Eagleton passed off the false report as "a ploy" because "when you need rest, you need rest from the press."[34] He explained that he had kept his medical record in the background because he didn't think people would understand. It was just not the sort of thing you talked about at cocktail parties. He was also worried about the effect it might have on his impressionable 13-year-old son. He pointed out that just as his own father had been his hero, so was he his son's hero, and he was afraid of doing anything that might jeopardize his son's fath in him.[35]

He said he believed that he had whipped his emotional problems and decided to take a calculated risk that the story would not leak out. Even if it did come out, he thought it would be a general story of how he once suffered a fatigue problem. He didn't think his shock treatments would be mentioned; and even if they had been, he felt he had proved himself after four years in the senate.[36]

He insisted he wasn't consciously trying to hide anything when McGovern aide Frank Mankiewicz spoke to him on the telephone the day he was selected and asked him if he had any skeletons in his closet. A skeleton, in his view, he said, was committing a crime, stealing from a client, violating legal ethics or something like that. "There [was] nothing dirty or evil," he said, "about the fact that I had voluntarily gone into a hospital."[37] Mrs. Eagleton supported her husband on this point. "In our minds, Tom's past medical history was not a skeleton. It was an illness that he had suffered and it was all in the past."[38]

Eagleton also recalled the circumstances of the telephone call from McGovern, when he was surrounded by his jubilant wife and staff: "There was also the euphoria. You have to try to understand what that phone call meant to me."[39] His whole life was politics, he explained. Before, he had had a strong father

[34] "McGovern's First Crisis," p. 12.
[35] "Self, It Won't Be Easy," *Newsweek*, August 7, 1972, p. 17.
[36] *Ibid.*, p. 18.
[37] "Own Odyssey," p. 14.
[38] "Mrs. Eagleton's Own Story," p. 156.
[39] "Self," p. 19.

to help him financially, morally and politically. Now, he had done it on his own. He had taken a calculated risk, and he had misjudged.[40]

After the resignation, when he was back at work in his Washington office, Eagleton talked with author Joe McGinnis. "Hell, naturally I'm disappointed," he said, "but in a way it's a kind of relief. I mean, it's over now."[41] *Time* also noted that in Eagleton's cheerfulness after the resignation, "there was some suggestion that Eagleton himself might have had doubts about his ability to take the strain."[42]

While McGinnis was talking with Eagleton, the Washington *Star-News* was delivered to the office. On the front page

> . . . was an unpleasant column by Mary McGrory in which she wrote: "As for Eagleton, he displayed once again those cocker spaniel qualities—the bounding eagerness, the brown-eyed, unquenchable vivacity—that have made him, in the last seven days, something of a national pet" . . . Eagleton slowly shook his head. "Instead of giving a Checkers speech," he said, "I've become Checkers."[43]

Someone in the office asked Eagleton how he would react if he should be offered the vice-presidential nomination in 1976. His answer: "The first thing I'll say is: "Do you know about my health?"[44]

[40] *Ibid.*

[41] "I'll Tell You Who's Bitter, My Aunt Hazel," *Life*, August 18, 1972, p. 31.

[42] "After the Fall," August 14, 1972, p. 20.

[43] "Aunt Hazel," *op. cit.*, p. 13.

[44] *Ibid.*

Reaction

"It seems all but incredible
that he should continue . . ."

WITHIN two days of the Eagleton disclosures, a number of prominent newspapers had called for his resignation from the Democratic ticket. The most compelling reason given was that—in the words of the New York *Post*—"his continuance . . . [could] only produce cruel, diversionary conflicts in a year when real issues should be sharply defined and debated." Eagleton should step down, the *Post* continued, "in fairness to McGovern and to the many dedicated people who [had] enlisted under his banner. . . ."[1] The New York *Times* joined the *Post* a day later in urging the senator to leave the race. There was no policy reason for the wait, assistant editorial page editor A. H. Raskin explained, "but we decided it wouldn't hurt to let it cool for a day."[2] The *Times* took the view that "the only way the campaign [could] be turned back into a test of the programs and leadership qualifications of Nixon and McGovern" would be for Senator Eagleton "to retire from the field and permit the presidential contest to be decided on the issues. . . ."[3] James Reston, editorial columnist for the *Times*, saw Eagleton's resignation as "the least damaging way out of the mess." Any other course, he wrote, "inevitably [meant] this tragic personal controversy [would] hound and divert McGovern and the campaign until November."[4]

The Philadelphia *Evening Bulletin* and the Los Angeles *Times* characterized the medical disclosures as an extraneous issue—an added and unnecessary burden to the voters in making their

[1] *Editorials on File*, July 16-31, 1972, p. 913.
[2] "The Best and the Most," *Newsweek*, August 7, 1972, p. 58.
[3] Editorial, New York *Times*, July 28, 1972, p. 30.
[4] James Reston, "Eagleton Mess Shows Misjudgment," Detroit *Free Press*, July 31, 1972, p. 6-A.

decision. There were so many crucial issues to be decided in the campaign, said the *Bulletin*, that Eagleton should withdraw immediately to facilitate the choice of a replacement.[5] The senator looked like a serious political liability, concluded the *Times*, and "it [was] hard to see how McGovern and Eagleton [could] avoid the conclusion that it would be best for Eagleton to withdraw."[6]

The Atlanta *Constitution* urged Eagleton's prompt resignation to allow the campaign to proceed on the issues rather than on the alleged frailities of one candidate,[7] and the Miami *Herald* expressed similar concern as to whether the judgment of the electorate would be on matters of substance or on Senator Eagleton himself.[8]

The most divergent area of editorial opinion was centered on the health issue. Four general viewpoints could be identified: 1) those who believed Eagleton's medical history constituted an unacceptable risk, 2) those who were genuinely concerned whether Eagleton could stand the pace of high national office, 3) those who wanted Eagleton to release all of his medical records so that the public could judge his fitness and 4) those who were satisfied that Eagleton had overcome his past difficulties, and that health, therefore, should not be an issue.

The Washington *Post* took the position that there was no available answer concerning Senator Eagleton's fitness for the burdens of the presidency. His record of illness and treatment went beyond the mere seeking of psychiatric care, said the *Post*, and the burden imposed by his presence on the ticket could only be removed by his withdrawal as a candidate.[9] The public did not agree with Senator Eagleton, the Atlanta *Constitution* declared, that he had lived down his mental problems, and even though he might be an excellent senator, the nation should not take a risk of this magnitude.[10]

The Little Rock *Arkansas Gazette* found it troubling that of

[5] Editorial, July 27, 1972, p. 20.
[6] Editorial, July 26, 1972, p. 6, Pt. II.
[7] Editorial, July 29, 1972, p. 3-A.
[8] Editorial, July 27, 1972, p. 6-A.
[9] Editorial, July 26, 1972, p. A-18.
[10] Editorial, July 29, 1972, p. 3-A.

the two men McGovern asked to be his running mate, one should have a history of panic and the other a record of instability. A man with Eagleton's medical background, concluded the paper, should not be one heartbeat away from the presidency.[11] John S. Knight, editorial chairman of the Knight newspapers, was equally concerned that Eagleton might succeed to the presidency. Any doctor who said a psychiatric patient was "cured," Knight maintained, was toying with the truth. Quitting the ticket would make Eagleton a bigger, not a lesser man in the eyes of the country.[12] The Minneapolis *Tribune* reached the same conclusion as Knight: that no reputable psychiatrist would say that a person who suffered from deep-seated depression was permanently cured. Could Eagleton control the pressures in himself, the *Tribune* asked, if he were to succeed to the presidency?[13]

The New York *Times* granted that Eagleton had shown no incapacity for public performance, but contended that his previous posts had not been comparable to the pressures of the presidency—and that he must be considered as a possible president. There could be no flight from the demands of the office, the *Times* concluded, when decisions of fateful importance needed making, and periods of tension were not subject to control.[14]

Americans like to believe, observed the Detroit *News*, that the man who becomes president is better able to handle emotional problems than other men, since so much depends on his ability to make calm, wise decisions. "In the presidency," the *News* went on to say, "events have a way of setting the pace. Presidents must adjust to that pace or events get out of hand. Could Eagleton make that kind of adjustment?"[15] "The answer [was] probably no," said the Sioux Falls (South Dakota) *Argus-Leader*, for a man who planned to campaign six days and take Sundays off. Matters of government happen overnight, Sundays and weekends, the paper pointed out.[16] The San Juan (Puerto Rico) *Star* wondered

[11] *Editorials on File*, July 16-31, 1972, p. 913.

[12] John S. Knight, "Eagleton Could Best Serve Nation by Leaving Ticket," Detroit *Free Press*, July 30, 1972, p. 2-B.

[13] Editorial, July 27, 1972, p. 6-A.

[14] Editorial, July 28, 1972, p. 30.

[15] Editorial, July 27, 1972, p. 10-B.

[16] *Editorials on File*, July 16-31, 1972, p. 917.

editorially how a man could pace himself during something like the Cuban missile crisis.[17]

In the final analysis, a number of editorials concluded, the voters themselves would have to judge the doubts that had been raised by the Eagleton disclosures. His recovery, the Denver *Post* said, was a question that could not be answered with assurance, if it could be answered at all. The senator might be as stable and responsible as any other official, but no one could dispel the doubts that had been raised. Eagleton's medical history, the *Post* believed, was not an inherent disqualification for vice-president, but "it [did] constitute a serious additional risk for the voters to consider."[18] The key question, in the view of the Louisville *Courier-Journal*, was whether Eagleton would be seen as a man who had learned to pace himself, or as a dangerous man who was liable to overreactions.[19] Several newspapers, among them the Louisville *Times*, insisted that the public had a right to all available information on Eagleton so that it might make a reasonable judgment as to the senator's ability to withstand pressure. Only if Eagleton released the written reports of the doctors who had treated him, the *Times* argued, would the voters have final assurances that his problems were no more than he said they were. He was less than candid with McGovern, the paper continued, but he should be candid now and make all facts public. "To do less, would be to do a disservice to Senator McGovern, to his party and, most important, to his country."[20]

The Miami *Herald* and the Chicago *Tribune* agreed that the public had a right to know all the facts. The *Herald* did not draw much confidence from Eagleton's refusal to document his illnesses,[21] and the *Tribune* said voters were less disturbed by Eagleton's medical history itself than by his failure to disclose it. The senator might still be able to erase the blot on his record, the *Tribune* said, if he recognized that the public was entitled to know all the facts and "[stopped] playing cat and mouse with

[17] *Ibid.*, p. 913.
[18] Editorial, July 27, 1972, p. 26.
[19] Editorial, July 27, 1972, p. 18.
[20] *Editorials on File*, July 16-31, 1972, p. 914.
[21] Editorial, July 27, 1972, p. 6-A.

them."[22] The Norfolk *Virginian-Pilot* took a philosophical view of the health issue. The word "psychiatrist," the newspaper observed editorially, remained a dirty word in American politics, suggesting a scandal of some sort. In an age of big-city tensions, the people still insisted on small-town virtues for their politicians. The question wasn't whether Eagleton was fit to be vice-president—he was, on the record—but whether the American people preferred to have him or Vice-President Spiro T. Agnew a heartbeat away from the presidency.[23]

There was no evidence, the St. Louis *Post-Dispatch* said, that Eagleton's ability to bear the burdens of public office had been impaired by illness,[24] and the *Christian Science Monitor* argued that his medical record should be forgotten since the events occurred six or more years earlier and there had been no record of recurrence.[25] The Boston *Globe* took the view that an office holder's past illnesses "traditionally [were] regarded as irrelevant except to gossips," and that Eagleton "[would] have to be judged on the hustings for what he [was] and what he [stood] for."[26] Noting that Eagleton had not behaved irrationally as Missouri attorney general, lieutenant-governor, or as United States senator during the last four years, Karl E. Meyer, columnist for the *New Statesman*, concluded that Eagleton was being judged not by deeds but by the dread that that phrase "electroshock therapy" conjured.[27]

Rather than seeing Eagleton's health record as a liability, some editorialists viewed it as an asset. The Milwaukee *Journal* said that the senator's medical history suggested strengths, not weaknesses, since he had apparently made adjustments in learning to cope with life stresses.[28] The Dayton (Ohio) *Daily News* also characterized Eagleton's seeking of medical help as an indication of strength. Whether citizens saw it that way, the paper

[22] Editorial, July 26, 1972, p. 12.
[23] *Editorials on File*, July 16-31, 1972, p. 911.
[24] Editorial, July 27, 1972, p. 2-E.
[25] Editorial, July 27, 1972, p. 14.
[26] Editorial, July 27, 1972, p. 16.
[27] Karl E. Meyer, "The Eagleton Affair," *New Statesman*, August 4, 1972, p. 147.
[28] *Editorials on File*, July 16-31, 1972, p. 912.

suggested, would be a major test of America's maturity.[29] The *Daily News* saw no reason to doubt that the senator had solved his problems. Finally, the Charleston (West Virginia) *Gazette* interviewed "three prominent psychiatrists" who said that Eagleton should be a stronger person as a result of his therapeutic experience. The decision on keeping the senator, therefore, was strictly a political one, and McGovern and Eagleton would have to weigh the probable effects.[30]

While the health issue generated tangents of opinion, there was almost unanimous criticism of Eagleton's failure to inform McGovern of his medical history, and the editorial censure ranged from mild to extremely harsh. *Time* characterized the senator as either "naive or overambitious and dishonest" by keeping silent. "Tom Eagleton [was] an unlikely McBeth," *Time* commented, "but it [seemed] that vaulting ambition confused his judgment." In sharp contrast to his ringing statements that mental illness was no disgrace, the magazine continued, Eagleton and his family were extremely careful all along to disguise the facts. This was a reference to Eagleton's assertions that his hospitalizations were for gastric disorders and viral infections, when in fact they were for nervous exhaustion and depression.[31]

Newsweek struck the same note in terming Eagleton's failure to inform McGovern "a triumph of ambition over recitude." His clean breast came just 13 days too late, the magazine added.[32] "The kindest comment you [could] apply to this lack of candor," wrote W. R. Hearst, Jr., editor-in-chief of the Hearst newspapers, "[was] that Eagleton's ambition exceeded his judgment and sense of responsibility."[33] By his moment of untruth, Hearst went on, the senator had destroyed his credibility—a fact that had been faced by most of the nation's big Democratic papers. "What they [hadn't said] was what they were really thinking—namely, that 'This guy [was] suicide for us.' . . ."[34]

[29] *Ibid.*, p. 919.

[30] *Ibid.*

[31] "McGovern's First Crisis: The Eagleton Affair," *Time*, August 2, 1972, p. 11.

[32] "A Crisis Named Eagleton," *Newsweek*, August 7, 1972, p. 13.

[33] William Randolph Hearst, Jr., "Editor's Report," San Francisco *Examiner*, July 30, 1972, p. 1.

[34] *Ibid.*, p. 2-B.

Newspapers from coast to coast criticized Eagleton's lack of forthrightness. His silence was termed "a serious error in judgment" (Boston *Globe*); a "serious lack of candor and responsibility" (San Francisco *Examiner*); a "serious dereliction" (New Orleans *Times-Picayune*); a "grave political mistake (*Christian Science Monitor*), and "a grave disservice to Senator McGovern" (Des Moines *Register*). The Omaha *World-Herald* and the New York *Post* could find no sympathy for the senator. He had practiced calculated deceit for 12 years, the *World-Herald* said, and was paying the consequences.[35] The *Post* declared that Eagleton had cast fatal doubt on his credibility as a candidate and had disqualified himself by his act of concealment.[36] A question occurred to the Miami *Herald* that none of the other papers had brought up: Didn't the voters of Missouri also have a right to know the status of Eagleton's health during the years they elected him to office?[37]

Columnists and editorialists found Eagleton's defense of his silence unconvincing. Both Eagleton and McGovern, the Boston *Record-American* argued, were experienced enough to know that any shadow of mental illness was—or should be—"automatic grounds for disbarment to the second most important position in the land." The paper did not believe that Senator Eagleton would have been offered the nomination had McGovern known the truth, nor did it believe that Eagleton had any moral justification for withholding the facts. Concluding that Eagleton had totally disqualified himself, the *Record-American* found it "all but incredible that he should continue to be the Democratic candidate for vice president."[38]

The San Francisco *Examiner* saw a conflict between Eagleton's assertion that he did not think his illness important enough to mention and his statement to reporters that "I've been living with it for 12 years. I always knew it was going to come out some day." A man that concerned, the *Examiner* argued, would not have considered it unimportant at Miami Beach.[39] It was

[35] *Editorials on File*, July 16-31, 1972, p. 917.
[36] *Ibid.*, p. 913.
[37] Editorial, July 27, 1972, p. 6-A.
[38] *Editorials on File*, July 16-31, 1972, p. 916.
[39] Editorial, July 28, 1972, p. 38.

perhaps Eagleton's awareness that mental illness is not accepted in this country, the Minneapolis *Tribune* proposed, that kept him from openly admitting his health problems. This might have been the reason he used the phrase "nervous exhaustion" in his disclosures, which was neither a precise medical nor psychiatric diagnosis.[40]

The Washington *Post* was as skeptical as the San Francisco *Examiner* of Eagleton's justification for his silence (that he didn't do anything ugly or sinister). "It [was] hard for us not to conclude," the *Post* said, "that Senator Eagleton withheld the information precisely because he thought it might dissuade Senator McGovern from designating him for the job."[41] The *Post* also disapproved of Eagleton's campaign to stay on the ticket. It seemed designed to box McGovern into reducing his freedom to choose—just as Eagleton's earlier silence deprived McGovern of the opportunity to assess Eagleton's fitness as a vice-presidential candidate.[42]

There were a few voices of support for Eagleton in the general hue and cry. One of the most sympathetic, understandably, was that of St. Louis *Post-Dispatch*. When the news first broke, the paper ventured that Eagleton's candor in revealing his psychiatric history was likely "to balance whatever adverse political effects might follow," finding one point much to Eagleton's credit: "His decision to meet the issue quickly and head on. . . . This quality of decisiveness [was] admirable in political life. . . ." What the case boiled down to, the *Post-Dispatch* concluded, was whether Eagleton was capable of handling the vice-presidency. While finding it "somewhat disquieting" that he was "unable to find a way" to inform Senator McGovern of his health record, the editorial nevertheless characterized the senator's qualifications as unusually distinguished and meriting confidence.[43]

Two days later, as the crisis mounted, the *Post-Dispatch* praised Eagleton for handling the furor with courage and political skill, as well as with responsibility. Demands for the senator's withdrawal were premature and unpersuasive, the paper said, and

[40] Editorial, July 27, 1972, p. 6-A.
[41] Editorial, *Washington Post*, July 31, 1972, p. A-20.
[42] *Ibid.*
[43] Editorial, July 27, 1972, p. 2-B.

Eagleton was right to refuse them. At the time, there were no public outcries for Eagleton's removal and most Democratic politicians seemed undisturbed. "The issue, if there [was] any," the *Post-Dispatch* insisted, was whether Mr. Eagleton could "stand up to the pressure he [might] be under if he should become vice-president." "We would suppose," the editorial continued, "that Mr. Eagleton [was] under the greatest pressures of his political life, and if he [came] through, that ought to put an end to doubts as to whether he [could] bear the burdens of high office."[44]

As the affair approached a climax, the *Post-Dispatch* took a back-to-the-wall stance. Admitting that there was justified criticism on Eagleton's failure to inform McGovern, the paper nevertheless questioned whether that was sufficient reason to remove him from the ticket. The senator had responded to the attacks on him with skill and aplomb; he had not lost his composure or his sense of humor; he was the top campaigner of all the candidates; if he was unknown before, his name was now a household word; dumping him would risk defection by intellectuals and young people, and damage McGovern's image as a man of compassion and high moral caliber; and the choosing of a new candidate by the Democratic National Committee would smack of deals and smoke-filled rooms. Eagleton's record of public service, the *Post-Dispatch* summarized—as well as his ability as a campaigner, the public response to him and his fine performance in recent days—all commended him for the vice-presidential post.[45]

The Burlington (Vermont) *Free Press* expressed admiration for Eagleton's great courage in making his disclosures and suggested that "the senator from Missouri [was] deserving of more compassion than [was] generally accorded political leaders in election years."[46] *Commonweal* magazine, viewing Eagleton's performance on CBS's "Face the Nation," remarked that the senator came across as "a sincere and straightforward man who did not fully grasp the hard realities or complexities of the situation."[47]

[44] Editorial, July 28, 1972, p. 2-B.
[45] Editorial, July 31, 1972, p. 2-8.
[46] *Editorials on File*, July 16-31, 1972, p. 915.
[47] "The Eagleton Decision," August 11, 1972, p. 420.

Praise for Eagleton's "courage" in making his disclosures drew a counterreaction from several papers. The Omaha *World-Herald* reminded readers that the Knight newspapers had been ready to publish the story and termed the Custer press conference not an act of courage but one of self-preservation.[48] The Washington *Post* also found it impossible to understand how Eagleton's disclosures could be hailed as evidence of courage and candor in light of the timing and how the information was made public.[49]

Although Eagleton took the brunt of the editorial barrage, Senator McGovern and his staff were not overlooked. The New York *Times* put the major blame for the crisis on McGovern's failure to make an adequate study of Eagleton's qualifications. McGovern was also criticized by the *Times* for waiting to see if Eagleton could ride out the storm, instead of recognizing that the country should not have been asked to take the risk of a man with Eagleton's medical history just a heartbeat away from the presidency.[50] Eagleton couldn't help having been ill, the Little Rock *Arkansas Democrat* observed, but McGovern didn't have to choose him. There was plenty of time to check on the senator, the paper asserted, since his name had been bandied about by McGovern aides two weeks before the convention. McGovern's decision, and the way he made it, did not "say much for his ability to lead the country."[51] Columnist W. R. Hearst, Jr. agreed that "none of this nightmare would have happened" if McGovern's staff had conducted "a responsible, exhaustive probe,"[52] and the *Wall Street Journal* declared that McGovern's failure to develop a staff that would protect him "[raised] questions about his organizational ability."[53] The Detroit *News* wondered editorially whether these same advisers would go along with McGovern to the White House.[54]

The heaviest scorn was reserved for McGovern's statement that he would have chosen Eagleton as his running mate even if he

[48] *Editorials on File*, July 16-31, 1972, p. 917.
[49] Editorial, July 31, 1972, p. A-20.
[50] Editorial, July 30, 1972, p. 12, Sec. 2.
[51] *Editorials on File*, July 16-31, 1972, p. 913.
[52] "Editor's Report," p. 2-B.
[53] Editorial, July 27, 1972, p. 8.
[54] Editorial, July 27, 1972, p. 10-B.

had known about the senator's psychiatric history. Columnist James Reston believed that the remark made a bad situation even worse because it "[said] more for McGovern's personal loyalty than his judgment,"[55] and the *Arkansas Democrat* thought that the statement made the presidential nominee appear "ridiculous."[56] The Detroit *News* put the question bluntly: "Would McGovern actually have chosen a man likely to become a serious liability because of a history of psychiatric care?"[57] On the other hand the Washington *Post* reminded readers that McGovern was responding to an accomplished fact and operating in a situation in whch he had no real choice. He had no choice, the paper noted, because of Eagleton's silence and the lassitude of McGovern's staff.[58]

On the positive side, a few editorials characterized McGovern as "considerate and kind" and a "decent, compassionate human being." The presidential nominee was praised for standing up like a man in defending his selection and not bowing to public pressures. The St. Louis *Post-Dispatch* acclaimed the senator for his loyalty, but was confused a few days later as to just where McGovern stood: "He [had] been telling Mr. Eagleton he [wanted] him on the ticket, and at the same time hinting to newspaper reporters he [hoped] he [would] quit."[59]

A number of editorialists saw the Eagleton affair—in the words of the Washington *Post*—as an almost "natural consequence of the chaotic and thoughtless way" in which vice-presidential nominees were chosen.[60] Instead of the "admirable exercise in 'candor and openness' that Senator McGovern [professed] to regard it," the Philadelphia *Evening Bulletin* commented that it [was] another example of the undemocratic, careless, irresponsible and arrogant procedure for picking the vice-presidential nominee.[61] The Denver *Post* agreed on the need for procedural reform and advocated an open convention to encourage better screening

[55] Reston, "Eagleton Mess."
[56] *Editorials on File*, July 16-31, 1972, p. 913.
[57] Editorial, July 27, 1972, p. 10-B.
[58] Editorial, July 26, 1972, p. A-18.
[59] Editorial, July 31, 1972, p. 2-B.
[60] Editorial, July 26, 1972, p. A-18.
[61] Editorial, July 27, 1972, p. 20.

of candidates.[62] The Des Moines *Register* quoted a McGovern aide as saying "There wasn't time left to run an FBI check," but noted that McGovern had come to the convention as a clear favorite and yet left the vice-presidential selection to the last minute. The *Register* joined the Denver *Post* in suggesting an open convention. This would give the vice-presidential candidate stature in his own right, the paper contended, and would be more likely to bring out flaws in a candidate's background.[63]

Both the Sioux Falls (South Dakota) *Argus-Leader* and the Lansing (Michigan) *State Journal* raised the question of whether the vice-presidential nominee should be chosen in the limited amount of time available at the conventions. One possible solution, the *State Journal* proposed, would be for the national committees of the two major parties to draw up lists of vice-presidential candidates before the conventions and make these lists public. Those on the lists who wanted to eliminate themselves in advance could do so. As the selection process stood, the *State Journal* said, the delegates were denied any choice.[64]

As a result of the Eagleton disclosures, the Boston *Globe* concluded, the Democratic ticket might have been dealt a fatal blow,[65] and the Detroit *Free Press* saw it as "one more crushing burden to bear" at a time when the Democratic party was already in disarray. The affair scarcely reinforced the image of honesty that had been the McGovern trademark, the paper said.[66] Looking ahead, the New York *Times* declared that it was imperative that the Democrats move swiftly to reunite the party once Eagleton stepped down and made way for a new choice.[67]

[62] Editorial, July 27, 1972, p. 26.
[63] *Editorials on File*, July 16-31, 1972, p. 917.
[64] Editorial, July 30, 1972, p. C-2.
[65] Editorial, July 27, 1972, p. 16.
[66] Editorial, July 27, 1972, p. 6-A.
[67] Editorial, July 30, 1972, p. 12, Sec. 2.

Resignation

"McGovern the executioner was the real victim."

ONE OF THE saddest and most traumatic episodes in American political history [had] ended," the Saginaw (Michigan) *News* commented following Eagleton's resignation from the Democratic ticket.[1] In practical political terms, most papers agreed that his withdrawal was a clear necessity. McGovern had been entangled with the health issue since July 25, and the furor precluded any rational discussion of the differences between himself and Nixon. A symposium on mental health would have caused the great national issues to slide past by default,[2] and the Republicans would have only increased their tremendous advantage.[3] Now that the air had been cleared, Eagleton's health was no longer a divisive issue and McGovern could address himself to the problems of Vietnam, military spending, tax reform, full employment and welfare.[4]

Although agreeing that the health issue had sidetracked the McGovern campaign, many papers ascribed Eagleton's downfall to dissention within the Democratic ranks. The Detroit *Free Press* suggested that the political pressures to dump Eagleton—which translated into party support and strong financial backing—had been overwhelming. McGovern had forced Eagleton off the ticket, the paper said, because "he [needed] the pros and he [needed] the money."[5]

In a bitter editorial, the St. Louis *Globe-Democrat* declared that there had been no widespread demand for Eagleton's removal except by "mindless Democratic party lackeys and a few repre-

[1] *Editorials on File,* July 16-31, 1972, p. 923.

[2] Editorial, *Evening Bulletin* (Philadelphia), August 1, 1972, p. 22.

[3] *Ibid.*

[4] Editorial, *Star-Ledger* (Newark, N.J.), reprinted in *Editorials on File,* July 16-31, 1972, p. 921.

[5] Editorial, August 2, 1972, p. 6-A.

sentatives of the left-wing urban press." Eagleton was dumped, the paper said, because McGovern could not otherwise have raised money for the campaign.[6] The Denver *Post* and the Atlanta *Constitution* said that it was not just McGovern who finished Eagleton but the rank and file of Democrats all over the country. The Miami *Herald* granted that the pressures to drop Eagleton came largely from Democrats, but also detected what it called "an American consensus." "The public," the *Herald* said, had fixed some criteria for high office." It had been the people who compelled Senator McGovern to change his mind and start fresh.[7] The San Francisco *Chronicle* also believed that it was the public who wanted Eagleton off the ticket, judging by the polls, letters to the editors and conversations overheard between voters.[8]

In a searching analysis of why Eagleton resigned, the Milwaukee *Journal* eliminated medical, moral and political considerations as valid reasons. Medically, the *Journal* said, Eagleton had undergone a severe mental test since the disclosures and had performed admirably. Morally, the senator did not lie in response to a specific question, but rather had given a "less than complete reply to a general question." He should have mentioned his treatment, the paper granted, but it was "overly harsh to say he covered himself with disgrace." Politically, Eagleton had added a personal health question to the campaign, but had John F. Kennedy ruined the 1960 election because he had introduced the side issue of Catholism?[9]

The key political question, in the view of the *Journal*, was whether voters would react negatively. Some McGovern advisers feared the worst, and they were probably right. Thus, the dropping of Eagleton had been based not on the merits of the case but rather on "the cruel test of a widespread public prejudice"—plus the probable distractive effects of cluttering the campaign with a side issue. The departure of Eagleton was a "distressing concession to unenlightenment."[10]

Newspapers that had been concerned about the health issue

[6] *Editorials on File*, July 16-31, 1972, p. 920.
[7] Editorial, August 2, 1972, p. 6-A.
[8] Editorial, August 2, 1972, p. 38.
[9] Editorial, August 1, 1972, p. 16.
[10] *Ibid.*

saw Eagleton's leaving the ticket as the proper solution to the dilemma. It might well have been that he could have handled the fearful pressure of the presidency, the New York *Times* said. Certainly the cheerfulness and fortitude displayed in a week of extreme stress spoke eloquently for his stability under fire. Nevertheless, there were still extreme gaps in scientific knowledge of mental illness, the *Times* concluded, and it was impossible to predict how well Eagleton might bear up under long term responsibilities that would set their own pace.[11]

The San Jose (California) *Mercury* agreed that persons with a history of difficulty in handling stress should not be placed in the position of having to cope with more of it than any other single person in the country, day in and day out for four years,[12] and the San Francisco *Chronicle* saw no reason to abandon all suspicion that Eagleton's illness might recur.[13] The medical history of all persons seeking the presidency ought to go to the public, the *Chronicle* proposed. That would seem one of the positive results emerging from the Eagleton affair.[14] In supporting the Eagleton withdrawal, *Commonweal* noted that it did not find reassurances from psychiatrists and psychologists compelling. It meant little to say that Eagleton was still more stable than Nixon or Agnew, since that would apply to thousands of other Americans, too. Nor did it help much to point out the psychiatric difficulties of past presidents such as Lincoln or Wilson, since they were men of a simpler age. *Commonweal* concluded that there had already been too much concern about Nixon's stability under stress to be reassured by Eagleton's promises that he could pace himself. The pace of events was often not up to the president, the magazine pointed out.[15]

Just as the first flood of criticism after the disclosure had been directed at Eagleton, so did McGovern become the chief target following the withdrawal. The week of crisis, in fact, had seen a shift from censure of Eagleton to intense disapproval of McGovern's actions during the entire affair. One of the major

[11] Editorial, August 1, 1972, p. 34.
[12] *Editorials on File*, July 16-31, 1972, p. 924.
[13] Editorial, August 2, 1972, p. 38.
[14] *Ibid.*
[15] "The Eagleton Decision," August 11, 1972, p. 419.

charges leveled at the presidential nominee was his indecisiveness, vacillation and eventual reversal during the week-long controversy. McGovern had first placed himself "1,000 per cent" behind his running mate, *Newsweek* recounted, and was on record with that stand while trying to pressure Eagleton off the ticket through a series of clumsily-handled signals in the press. Instead of confronting Eagleton man to man, the magazine continued, McGovern had tried to push him off the ticket at the same time Eagleton was insisting he would remain.[16] *Time* also saw this undercutting of Eagleton as "devious."[17] *Newsweek* columnist Shana Alexander argued that McGovern had painted himself into a corner with his "1,000 per cent" statement. Although McGovern had said that he backed Eagleton out of compassion as a moralist, Alexander pointed out that most Americans wanted leaders who made decisions more rooted in practicality than sincerity, and they were probably right.[18] The Los Angeles *Times* took the same view. The presidency required personal loyalty and respect for the dignity of the individual, the paper granted, but it also demanded "an overriding toughness and decisiveness. . . . The interests of the nation [came] first. The great decisions [could not] be deferred to public opinion polls or committees or staff aides."[19]

Washington *Star-News* columnist Mary McGrory commented that Eagleton had caught the public fancy like a man who was clinging to a window ledge while dozens of hands tried to rescue him. In the end, she concluded, McGovern and Eagleton had reversed roles. "McGovern the executioner was the real victim." By postponing the inevitable, he had won few friends—only a reputation for vacillation.[20] *Saturday Review* editorialist Ronald P. Kriss observed that "in a situation that called for crisp and decisive action, McGovern made it appear that his mind was being made up for him by party leaders."[21]

16 "A Crisis Named Eagleton," August 7, 1972, p. 12.

17 "George McGovern Finally Finds a Veep," *Time*, August 14, 1972, p. 14.

18 "Eagleton's Saintly Revenge," November 13, 1972, p. 41.

19 Editorial, August 2, 1972, p. 11, Pt. 6.

20 "In the End, McGovern Was Victim," Cleveland *Plain Dealer*, August 2, 1972, p. 10-A.

21 "A Difficult but Necessary Decision," August 18, 1972, p. 26.

A second major criticism of McGovern was that his actions were those of a cheap politician. The Chicago *Tribune* charged that Eagleton had been "thrown to the wolves," describing the episode as marked by "amateurish bumbling, cynicism, bad judgment and deceit." When McGovern learned of Eagleton's problems, the *Tribune* recalled, he had kept quiet until forced into the open by the press. Then he had tried to get it over with in a quick news conference. He had supported Eagleton and then had dropped hints to reporters of his displeasure. Finally, he had let Jean Westwood, the Democratic party chief, "do his dirty work for him" on her NBC "Meet the Press" interview.[22]

The Portland *Oregonian* described Eagleton as "walking the last mile" to his confrontation and returning "a beaten man . . . cashiered by McGovern." The South Dakotan, said the paper, stood convicted of "sacrificing his running mate on the altar of political expediency."[23] The St. Louis *Post-Dispatch* also accused McGovern of "hastily sacrificing his man" after several Eastern newspapers had said Eagleton's candidacy was untenable and demanded his withdrawal. "The country [might] well wonder," the Post-Dispatch said, at what point expediency [became] incompatible with principle."[24] The Cleveland *Plain Dealer* found McGovern's actions "an astonishing shift . . . for a man who [had accused] Mr. Nixon of switching for political expediency."[25]

McGovern's staff was given a large share of the blame for the fiasco. What seemed incredible, the Hartford *Courant* said, was that Senator McGovern and his palace guard did not look more deeply into every scrap of Eagleton's qualifications—or lack of them—before picking his name out of a hat. The episode, the newspaper concluded, "certainly [put] a cloud of doubt over the wisdom of the Democrats and their presidential nominee."[26]

"More than anything else," the Detroit *News* commented, the affair had revealed "the bad judgment, the hastiness and the equivocation of the McGovern organization"[27] and the Atlanta

[22] *Editorials on File*, July 16-31, 1972, p. 920.
[23] *Ibid.*
[24] Editorial, August 2, 1972, p. 2-B.
[25] Editorial, August 2, 1972, p. 10-A.
[26] Editorial, August 2, 1972, p. 14.
[27] Editorial, August 1, 1972, p. 6-B.

Constitution was "appalled at the sloppy staff work and the careless decision process."[28] The Minneapolis *Tribune* noted that asking Eagleton if he had any skeletons in his closet "[did] not qualify as a thoughtful, cautious way to elicit information." Granting that Eagleton was wrong in keeping silent, the *Tribune* said that the greater burden was on McGovern and his staff to check out possibilities.[29]

McGovern's credibility and integrity were seen as severely damaged—if not destroyed—by his behavior during the week of crisis. "Nothing [would] restore the patina of courage and integrity," wrote the Portland *Oregonian*, "with which McGovern [had] sought to overlay his campaign,"[30] and the Minneapolis *Tribune* agreed that "some of the luster [was] off that image of the man above crass politics and compromise." There might now be some people, the *Tribune* observed, who wondered how McGovern's new politics differed from the old.[31] *Newsweek* columnist Shana Alexander believed that McGovern had destroyed the one advantage he had over his opponent—his rock-hard integrity,[32] and the St. Louis *Globe Democrat* found it difficult to understand how McGovern could have tolerated Ted Kennedy and yet acted as he had toward Eagleton.[33]

The Kansas City *Times* charged that McGovern had even insulted the intelligence of American voters by asserting that Eagleton's medical history would divert them from the issues. What he was really saying, the *Times* continued, was that Americans as a people lacked the maturity to make judgments on personalities and issues. McGovern, the *Times* concluded, had fallen in the estimation of many Americans.[34]

Perhaps the most severe criticism of the presidential nominee came from the St. Louis *Globe-Democrat*, which said that the episode proved McGovern could not "be trusted to be president of the United States." The paper characterized McGovern's

[28] Editorial, August 2, 1972, p. 4-A.
[29] Editorial, August 2, 1972, p. 6-A.
[30] *Editorials on File*, July 16-31, 1972, p. 918.
[31] Editorial, August 2, 1972, p. 6-A.
[32] "Saintly Revenge," p. 41.
[33] *Editorials on File*, July 16-31, 1972, p. 920.
[34] *Ibid.*, p. 919.

tactics as "sinister," "cowardly," "lying," "treacherous" and "sneaking," accused the South Dakotan of "blatant opportunism" and "lack of public honesty" and concluded that Senator Eagleton had recovered from his illness but saw "serious doubt that Senator McGovern [had] recovered from his."[35]

On a less emotional level, the *Wall Street Journal* speculated on the impulses that had made Senator McGovern a paramount figure on the American scene. The paper concluded that the senator was continually discovering that "the world is a more complicated place than he thought it was."[36] In a similar vein, the San Francisco *Examiner* suggested that McGovern's actions during the week raised questions about his ability to govern. "The ability to choose men wisely," the paper observed, "is one of the talents the president of the United States must have. . . ." Senator McGovern, the paper said, must show he knows how to handle men.[37]

Although most of the criticism directed at Eagleton took place immediately after his disclosures, he again came under fire following his resignation from the ticket. So driven was the senator by political ambition, the Chicago *Tribune* said, that rather than dealing openly with his medical problems—as had Senator Harold Hughes of Iowa with alcoholism—he took pains to hide the truth for a decade. Then, when he was finally forced into the open, he had tried to dismiss his psychiatric difficulties as no worse than a broken leg—which one doesn't try to conceal.[38]

New Statesman critic Karl E. Meyer declared that it "stretched charity" that it hadn't occurred to the "fiercely ambitious" Eagleton that telling McGovern the truth might have cost him the nomination, particularly in light of the fact that the senator had discussed the matter with his wife en route to the convention.[39] Shana Alexander of *Newsweek* found Eagleton's lack of candor "striking," and his self-justifications "unconvincing." Labeling his psychiatric treatments as a "gastric disturbance" and a "virus," she said, "were hardly the actions of a man who was

[35] *Ibid.*, p. 920.
[36] Editorial, August 2, 1972, p. 8.
[37] Editorial, August 2, 1972, p. 32.
[38] *Editorials on File*, July 16-31, 1972, p. 920.
[39] "The Eagleton Affair," *New Statesman*, August 4, 1972, p. 147.

unaware that mental illness was a skeleton. She added that Eagleton's ambition "had brought the campaign to the edge of disaster."[40] *Commonweal* pointed out that Eagleton might not have considered his hospitalization as a skeleton but he should have understood how others would see it and informed McGovern sooner.[41] The San Jose *Mercury* believed that Eagleton hed "let his self confidence overcome his judgment"[42] and the Washington *Post* saw the senator not as a victim of some national prejudice against mental illness—as did the Milwaukee *Journal*—but rather as a victim of his own misjudgment.[43]

Once the issue was settled, a number of periodicals reviewed the week and found complimentary things to says about both candidates. Eagleton in particular was praised for his "gracious withdrawal," which had won him "a triumph of the spirit" (*Commonweal*), and for holding up "calmly and confidently under extreme personal and political pressure" (Kansas City *Times*). The New York *Times* called Eagleton's resignation "an admirable act of self-abnegation"[44] and the St. Louis *Post-Dispatch*—the senator's strongest supporter throughout the crisis—declared that Eagleton had emerged from his ordeal "with twice the stature of Mr. McGovern," standing up to attacks on his character with "unwavering composure." "In the space of a week," the paper declared, "Eagleton [had] become known to the people as a man of courage, intelligence and immense personal appeal. . . . He should have the brighest kind of political future."[45]

Mary McGrory, editorial columnist of the Washington *Star-News*, commented sardonically that McGovern must have been relieved that Eagleton submitted without a public outcry, and that Eagleton, in turn, must thank McGovern for "lifting him to the status of a super-celebrity with a bright future."[46] Eagleton was now a free man, the Washington *Post* observed—free of the secrecy that had dogged him, free of any obligation to his party or his presidential candidate and free to pursue his career

40 "Saintly Revenge," p. 41.
41 "Eagleton Decision," p. 420.
42 *Editorials on File*, July 16-31, 1972, p. 924.
43 Editorial, August 2, 1972, p. A-20.
44 Editorial, August 1, 1972, p. 34.
45 Editorial, August 1, 1972, p. 2-B.
46 "In the End."

and aspirations.[47] The Sacramento *Bee* credited McGovern with loyalty in trying to keep Eagleton as long as possible and with decisiveness in recognizing the pressures to resolve the issue by Eagleton's withdrawal. The *Bee* believed that both McGovern and Eagleton behaved in exemplary fashion and "reacted with the best of human instincts."[48] McGovern did what he had to do, the Chicago *Daily News* said, with grace and dignity, and—to his equally great credit—Eagleton saw the necessity and accepted the decision in that vein.[49] Granting that McGovern did appear indecisive by waiting as long as he did, the Denver *Post* suggested that this allowed most of the bitterness to spend itself.[50]

Predictions of how the Eagleton affair would affect the McGovern campaign were universally gloomy. The St. Louis *Globe-Democrat*—McGovern's bitterest critic—commented that it was all for the best that Eagleton resigned the nomination, since he would not be part of the crushing defeat that loomed for the Democratic ticket in November.[51] The Kansas City *Times* declared that where McGovern had been traveling an uphill road before, he was now climbing a mountain.[52] And the St. Louis *Post-Dispatch* suggested that McGovern might have blown his chances "by his spineless act" in dumping Eagleton. McGovern had lost the enthusiasm and perhaps the votes of idealistic young people, the *Post-Dispatch* said, and his "ill-advised decision [would] haunt him through a campaign which [had] lost its flavor for many Americans."[53]

The Missouri papers were predictably upset by what had happened to their junior senator, but there was general pessimism nationwide regarding Democratic prospects. The Portland *Oregonian*, also speculating about the reaction of young voters and the not-so-young idealists, concluded that McGovern's actions might have destroyed his chances.[54] The Cleveland *Plain Dealer* agreed that the Eagleton matter would "linger to haunt McGovern

[47] Editorial, August 2, 1972, p. A-20.
[48] *Editorials on File*, July 16-31, 1972, p. 921.
[49] *Ibid.*, p. 921.
[50] Editorial, August 2, 1972, p. 30.
[51] *Editorials on File*, July 16-31, 1972, p. 920.
[52] *Ibid.*, p. 919.
[53] Editorial, August 1, 1972, p. 2-B.
[54] *Editorials on File*, July 16-31, 1972, p. 918.

in the coming three campaign months,"[55] and the Chicago *Tribune* predicted that it would "dog McGovern into November."[56] McGovern should have accepted Eagleton's offer to quit at the outset, the Houston *Chronicle* said, which would have put the party back on the trail sooner. As it was, serious damage had already been done to the party's chances.[57] It was left to *New Statesman* writer Karl E. Meyer to write the undisputed epitaph to the Eagleton affair: "No one emerged from it with glory or unblemished honor."[58]

Two major issues came into sharp focus as a result of the Eagleton controversy: the choosing of vice-presidential nominees and public attitudes toward mental illness. The Minneapolis *Tribune* observed that the episode threw into shameful light the haphazard way in which vice-presidential candidates were chosen, despite the fact that one-third of U.S. presidents had served previously as vice-president.[59] Karl E. Meyer called the vice-presidential selection process "a slapdash after-thought amid the euphoria of a convention victory."[60] The Denver *Post* said it hoped the incident would provide both parties with the motivation to change the system and made a suggestion of its own: that vice-presidential candidates should go through primaries or a convention contest to prove their ability to take the strain. Such a procedure would also subject the candidate to closer scrutiny. If Eagleton had gone through one of these processes, the newspaper predicted, he might have been able to demonstrate his leadership abilities so that his illness would not have mattered had it come out.[61] The Atlanta *Constitution* joined the Denver *Post* in calling for an open convention.[62]

Senator Eagleton himself offered alternatives to the present selection system: First, the man seeking the presidency should announce his running mate and the two would run as an entry

55 Editorial, August 2, 1972, p. 10-A.
56 *Editorials on File*, July 16-31, 1972, p. 920.
57 *Ibid.*, p. 922.
58 "Eagleton Affair," *op. cit.*, p. 147.
59 Editorial, August 2, 1972, p. 6-A.
60 "Eagleton Affair," *loc. cit.*
61 Editorial, August 2, 1972, p. 30.
62 Editorial, August 2, 1972, p. 4-A.

in 23 state primary elections. In this way, the vice-presidential candidate would have national exposure. The second possibility—which Eagleton himself preferred—would be to do away with the vice-presidential nominating process altogether. Instead, the presidential nominee would choose his running mate within 10 days. In either case, Eagleton said, the president must have a man with whom he is personally, politically and philosophically compatible.[63] Vice-President Spiro T. Agnew publicly advocated leaving the nominating system as it is, since in his view the presidential candidate had at least a year before the convention to deliberate on his choice for vice-president.[64]

The Eagleton debacle was also seen as a blow to the cause of mental health in the United States. Irving H. Chase, president of the National Association for Mental Health, said that it was obvious that people were still unaware of what mental illness really was, and that after seeing what had happened to the Senator, there might be fewer people seeking help when they needed it.[65] In *New Statesman*, Karl E. Meyer wished that a panel of qualified psychiatrists had been able to examine Eagleton's medical file and offer a considered opinion, evaluating the other candidates as well. A politician, Meyer said, was "politically safer untreated, however much his disorder [might] menace his judgment." "In effect, Meyer continued, "a known psychiatric patient [had] as much chance of being elected as a known homosexual or an alcoholic." "However one [might] feel about Eagleton's capacity," he concluded, "we [were] deeper than ever in the Dark Ages."[66]

[63] "The Role of the Vice Presidency," *Current*, October, 1972, p. 47.

[64] *Ibid.*

[65] "The Eagleton Affair: Stigma of Mental Disorder." *Science News*, August 5, 1972, p. 81.

[66] "Eagleton Affair."

Perspective

"A personal tragedy and
a lesson for 'The System.'"

DID THE PRESS overplay the Eagleton story in the so-called "summer news slump?" Several critics have suggested as much, but who can say that the affair—with all its elements of high drama—would not have had as much impact no matter when it might have taken place? Senator and Mrs. Eagleton accused the press of overreaction, but they also believed that the vice-presidential candidate was "cured" and had "proved himself" over the past six years. Considering all the factors involved, however—the issues brought to the surface, the suspense generated by Eagleton's fight to stay on the ticket, Senator McGovern's indecision—the charge of overreaction seems too convenient and simplistic.

Certainly press criticism of Eagleton was outspoken, but the press had every right to be skeptical of the senator's self-justifications, considering his actions in hiding the truth for a dozen years. As editorialists noted, Eagleton should have understood how others would see his illnesses, no matter what his own views, and should have kept the voters of his own state informed as to the status of his health. One can appreciate why Eagleton would want to believe that he was "cured" and that his medical past was no skeleton, but it does not excuse his lack of candor with McGovern. The press had an obligation to question the senator's motives and good judgment, and this it did in a penetrating and responsible way. The charge of "vicious character attacks" on the senator was undeserved.

When news of the Eagleton disclosures broke, most of the editorial calls for the nominee's resignation were based not on character faults or bad judgment but on more objective grounds: that 1) it would sidetrack the campaign in a year of grave national issues, and that 2) it was dangerous for *anyone* with a history of inability to handle stress to be in line for the pres-

idency. This was hardly a call to "dump Eagleton" for reasons of "political pragmatism." Furthermore, as the week wore on, the press expressed admiration for the way the senator responded to the pressures on him; and, at the end, it generally gave him high marks for graciousness and good humor.

It seemed strange that the New York *Times* should have been criticized for the "vehemence" of its editorial comment. The *Times*, in fact, withheld its initial editorial for an extra day to avoid jumping into the fray, and then gave a calm, reasoned discussion of why Eagleton should leave the ticket. The "bias-of-the-Eastern-press" charge overlooked equally concerned newspapers in Los Angeles, Denver, Detroit and other cities around the country.

Eagleton, however, was treated with relative gentleness compared with some of the criticism leveled at Senator McGovern and his staff once the affair had ended. The most vehement commentary, in fact, came not from the anti-Eagleton papers, but from the pro-Eagleton papers writing about Senator McGovern. The presidential candidate's judgment, integrity, character, political acumen and organizational ability were all called into question—not by the Eastern press primarily, but by the Midwestern press.

There was little disagreement that McGovern came off badly in the episode and this was duly noted by the press. If the senator had been badly used by Eagleton—and the press pretty much agreed that he had been—his own actions during the week were nothing to be proud of, particularly his attempt to force Eagleton off the ticket by means of newspaper stories. If McGovern's indecisiveness was due to his compassion for Eagleton, as he claimed it was, then editorialists were correct in arguing that presidents must be made of sterner stuff and must put the interests of the nation above personal considerations.

The press was also accused by the Eagletons of having an "unsophisticated" attitude toward mental illness. In point of fact, the press granted that Eagleton had performed well since his last hospitalization but noted that the pressures on a senator were in no way comparable to the pressures on a president, adding that Eagleton must be considered a potential president. It was not mental illness itself that concerned the press, but

whether a man with Senator Eagleton's medical history should be put in the position of having to cope with the kind of mega-stress inherent in the highest political office in the nation. The press was not reassured by Eagleton's refusal to release his medical records, or by his assertion that he could "pace himself."

Many newspapers also recognized the need for reform in the vice-presidential nominating procedure. The Denver *Post*, in fact, headlined its editorial following Eagleton's resignation, "A Personal Tragedy and a Lesson for 'The System.'" The personal tragedy could be lived down by Senator Eagleton, but the system clearly needed changing and several constructive suggestions were advanced by editorial writers.

It would be untrue, of course, to suggest that the entire press corps of the nation behaved nobly during the controversy. There were certainly excesses in squeezing the story for human interest. A few reporters—on television as well as in the print media—treated Eagleton as if he were on trial for a criminal offense. Despite the sour notes, however, the best judgment here is that the press performed an invaluable service to the American electorate in defining and evaluating the critical issues involved in the affair. The pity of it all was that no single voter could have been exposed to the total depth and breadth of editorial thought that developed nationwide throughout the week of crisis. If this had been possible, the reader would have received a remarkably thoughtful and perceptive analysis of exactly what was at stake.

APPENDIX

Publications Examined

NEWSPAPERS

Akron *Beacon Journal*
Atlanta *Constitution*
Biloxi (Miss.) *Daily Herald*
Boston *Globe*
Boston *Record-American*
Burlington (Vt.) *Free Press*
Charleston *Gazette*
Chicago *Daily News*
Chicago *Tribune*
Christian Science Monitor
Cleveland *Plain Dealer*
Dayton *Daily News*
Denver *Post*
Des Moines *Register*
Detroit *Free Press*
Detroit *News*
Hartford *Courant*
Houston *Chronicle*
Kansas City *Times*
Lansing (Mich.) *State Journal*
Little Rock *Arkansas Democrat*
Los Angeles *Times*
Louisville *Courier-Journal*
Louisville *Times*
Miami *Herald*
Milwaukee *Journal*
Minneapolis *Tribune*
Newark *Star-Ledger*
New Bedford (Mass.) *Standard-Times*
New Orleans *Times-Picayune*
New York *Post*
New York *Times*
Norfolk *Virginian-Pilot*
Norfolk *Ledger-Star*
Oklahoma City *Times*
Omaha *World-Herald*
Philadelphia *Evening Bulletin*
Portland *Oregonian*
Roanoke (Va.) *Times*
Sacramento *Bee*
Saginaw (Mich.) *News*
St. Louis *Globe-Democrat*
St. Louis *Post-Dispatch*
St. Petersburg *Times*
Salt Lake City *Deseret News*
San Francisco *Chronicle*
San Francisco *Examiner*
San Juan (Puerto Rico) *Star*
San Jose *Mercury*
Sioux Falls (S.D.) *Argus-Leader*
Wall Street Journal
Washington *Post*

MAGAZINES

Commonweal
Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report
Current
Editor & Publisher
Ladies Home Journal
Life
New Republic
New Statesman
Newsweek
Saturday Review
Science News
Time
U.S. News & World Report
Vital Speeches of the Day